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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM SOCI RS

SUBJECT: KREMLIN UNHAPPINESS CAUSES MOSCOW'S "DOMASHNIY"

CHANNEL TO PULL TALK SHOW

Classified By: Polmincouns Alice G. Wells. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Ekho Moskvy Editor-in-Chief Aleksey Venedikov confirmed to Embassy September 19 that a newly-minted television program hosted by him and telejournalist Svetlana Sorokina had been pulled from the air following a September 10 episode that the authorities had apparently found too controversial. According to Venedikov the program, "V kruge sveta," was the brainchild of STS Media Director Aleksandr Rodnyanskiy who for more than one year had lobbied his friends Venedikov and Sorokina to be its hosts. Both had resisted Rodnyanskiy's overtures, said Venedikov, because they thought the "Domashniy" target audience would not be interested in an edgy political program. ("Domashniy" generally confines itself to lifestyle programming.) Sorokina and Venedikov agreed only when Rodnyanskiy promised them that the only off-limits subject would be President Putin.

¶2. (C) The program debuted September 2 and aired only four times before, according to Venedikov, running afoul of the Kremlin. The September 11 program that triggered "V krige sveta's" cancellation was devoted to jury trials and featured as guests publicist Marietta Chudakova and lawyer Genrikh Pavda. The two, with hosts Venedikov and Sorokina, conducted a no holds-barred discussion touching on sentences meted out to Chechen nationals in Russia, verdicts in hate crime trials, the recent disturbances in Kondopoga, and the Ulman case. Putin's name, said Venedikov, was not mentioned, but Russia's experiment with jury trials was termed a failure.

¶3. (C) Domashniy's general director warned Venedikov September 13 that the program was in trouble, and on September 15, the director told Venedikov that Presidential Administration Chief Vladislav Surkov had called Alfa Group head Petr Aven (Alfa Group is part owner of STS Media), who pressured Rodnyanskiy. Rodnyanskiy agreed to pull the program. "Aiding" Rodnyanskiy's decision to cancel the program, according to Venedikov, was a recent comment allegedly made by President Putin to Aven about Rodnyanskiy's "untrustworthiness." Said Venedikov, "Rodnyanskiy understands completely that his continued survival at STS depends on Putin." Venedikov was philosophical about the cancellation, complaining only that his friend Rodnyanskiy had to date not called him to apologize.

¶4. (C) Comment: The cancellation of "V krige sveta" is another example of the Kremlin's sensitivity to even indirect media criticism. After only four episodes, it is unlikely that the program had acquired a significant viewing audience and the discussion, although freewheeling, steered clear of the Presidential Administration, but was evidently unflattering enough to cause Surkov to pick up the phone.

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